

COMMUNION MEDITATION
FEBRUARY 20, 1972
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT.

LUKE 2:14-30
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

It is a long and difficult journey from the abstract to the specific. It is much safer, and easier, not to take the journey. Think, for instance, about "Peace on Earth" - an honorable and noble sentiment: everyone is for it - no one is against it. The trouble with Peace on Earth is that it is an abstraction, and the moment we try to make it specific we must deal with the build-up along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and our Asian policy, and the Pentagon and the defense budget. And, frankly, that's treacherous going: so most of us settle for the abstract.

Or take "Brotherhood", another noble and inspiring ideal. But it is an abstraction, and the moment it starts getting specific we have to deal with a black man who is angry, and whose anger is frightening: the moment brotherhood moves from the abstract to the specific we have to deal with the result that that particular man is my brother.

Or take "free enterprise". Who is against it? No One. But the moment the abstract concept of free enterprise gets specific we have to deal with some pretty knotty questions such as the propriety of the government bailing-out bankrupt industries, or protecting the consumer, or regulating interstate commerce.

Or take God's love - perhaps the most abstract of all abstractions. Who can respond in any way but positively to that phrase - God's love? But the moment the love of God gets specific we must come to terms with Jesus Christ. And if history is any teacher, we can see that the human response to the specific man Jesus is anything but positive. In fact, sometimes it comes out quite the opposite.

When abstractions become concrete the results, in more cases than not, offend us, and disturb us, and more often than not, we opt for the relative safety of the original abstraction.

Dr. William Muehl, of Yale Divinity School, tells a story about visiting a very old colonial homestead in New England. The feel of history was in the house, and his guide was an elderly spinster - the last living person in her

pre-revolutionary family. As he walked through the rooms he could imagine those gallant and brave people who lived and ate and slept there in 1775. In the living room he saw a musket, hanging over the fire place, and as he reached up to touch it, his elderly quide sharply reprimanded him, "Don't touch that - It's loaded," she said. When he asked about this unlikely situation she told him that the rifle was placed there by her great, great, great grandfather, loaded and ready to be fired in the cause of freedom. Dr. Muehl assumed that he had died in the revolution. "no" she corrected him, "he died quietly at a ripe old age, decades after the war. In fact he never fired the rifle; didn't even take it down off the wall: didn't think much of General Washington's revolt". Dr. Muehl speculates then about the old gentlemen: how he probabaly imagined himself a romantic revolutionary, mind full of democratic ideals, bravely leading a corps of neatly uniformed militiamen into valiant battle against the oppressors: fighting for liberty and justice, shoulder to shoulder with his brave compatriots. That's how he imagined himself: that was the abstract. Muehl could see him sitting in the rocking chair before the fireplace, gazing up at his loaded weapon and contemplating revolution in the abstract. But when the theory of revolution became specific it wasn't anything like what he had imagined. Instead it probably happened one morning when his neighbors gathered in the road in front of his house, dressed for farming - carrying an odd assortment of weapons. And the call was not to the lofty ideal of freedom and justice: rather, it probably sounded like this: "get your gun, neighbor, there's been a scrap over at Lexington." And so the gun remained on the wall - because the specific was not nearly as inspiring, or as clear, as the abstract.

Anyone who has ever been committed to a cause knows the truth of this maxim. Right now there are a lot of creative and hopeful things happening in our own community, for instance in the areas of juvenile justice and care for pre-delinquent young people. And they are happening because some people are willing to take an abstraction and work with it, through night after night of boring meetings: it takes patience and courage and commitment. It's not always clear that the time invested is related to the abstract goal. But things happen when

people are willing to travel that important journey.

Moving from the abstract to the specific is what happened one day at Nazareth, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After his baptism and temptation experiences Jesus launched his public career by traveling throughout Galilee, preaching and teaching wherever he went. Finally, he came to Nazareth, his home town. It was the Sabbath, and he joined his neighbors and relatives and old friends in the Synagog. Sabbath worship was both formal and informal. There was no priest: rather administration was done by an elected leader along with a kind of Board of Directors called Elders. A prescribed portion of the law was read each week, and the Synagog leader would ask one of the men to read from the Prophets and, if he wished, to comment on the passage - that is, to preach a sermon. If there was a visiting dignitary or Rabbi in the congregation it was customary to invite him to read and speak. So it was that Jesus - the carpenter they all know, was on this Sabbath day - invited to be the reader.

He chose a very significant passage from the prophets to read: Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

New Testament research has discovered that this was a very important passage in the year 30 AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that some of the desert religious committees adopted this prophetic utterance as their own, believing that it was about to become an actuality. It had been a century since the period of Roman occupation and oppression had begun. And the people of Galilee thought they saw themselves in the words of the prophet: they were the poor, the captives, the oppressed.

So an electric shock went through the congregation as he rolled up the scroll, sat down and said: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"...

They liked what they heard: this was it: this was the year of the Lord's coming. It sounded good, but then they realized that a very safe abstraction

was becoming specific. It slowly dawned on them that the lofty messianic dream was being claimed by this man sitting in front of them: this man they knew and had watched growing up.

And so they said: 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' And the enthusiastic surprise was infected by skepticism and then hostility. They knew this man! He couldn't be the Messiah! The specific proposal was offensive to them: it had nothing to do with the abstract. They knew what he was up to: they had heard about him spending his time with the truly poor, the outcasts, the lepers, the sinners. His specific interpretation of Isaiah's abstractions was most repugnant.

And then to make matters worse, he pulled two illustrations out of the scriptures involving Elisha and Elijah, both of whom did their ministry with non-Israelites. That really threatened and angered them. And the good, respectable, Synagog people of Nazareth were transformed into a lynch mob. They threw him unceremoniously out of the city and would have killed him on the spot, but somehow he got away.

This story, standing where it does at the beginning of Jesus ministry, is Luke's introduction to everything that follows. As the story unfolds, Jesus keeps getting more and more specific, and the people get more and more angry. At the end he is not only discredited as their messiah, but also made to bear very specific pain and very specific death. And even there - as he was stretched out on the cross before their very eyes, the people who were thrilled by prophetic abstractions about the suffering servant spat in the face of the specific man who was suffering for them.

Abstractions inspire: but the incarnation disturbed people. The concept of a messiah was very popular, but Jesus Christ infuriated them. So it has always been.

We are still inspired and lifted up by those stirring phrases: "good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed". But we're not at all certain that we want anything to do with these ideas when they begin to take on flesh and form: where poor means an ACE mother, or captive means a particular prisoner, or oppressed means a

Mississippi sharecropper. The good folk of Nazareth became a lynch mob - and so, in a sense, do we, when the clear imperative of our Lord motivates our Church to put its money where its Lord was.

Abstractions inspire, but the incarnation disturbs and disgusts. And so we turn in anger to religion in general: Christianity in the abstract which talks about the brotherhood of man and love and comfort and lets it go at that.

In the Lenten Season, we are called to confront the specific implications of a God who refuses to be an abstraction; a God who will not remain a philosophic concept; a God who came among us in a man, and who keeps on coming among us in the context of our own lives.

In the Lenten Season we are called to see that we are not abstractions to God either; that his love is not for mankind in general, but for you and me specifically.

And we begin the Lenten Season at the table of our Lord: no abstractions here; just bread and wine, representing the real body and real blood of a specific man, whose body was broken and blood shed, not for an idea, but for us. AMEN

Father, it's easier to think theologically, then to be a disciple; it's more comfortable to talk about you then to confront your son. In this Lenten Season as we turn our thoughts to the passion of our Lord, help us to move from the abstract to the specific, to know once again the mystery of your love for us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN